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President Obama: "Significant Progress" in Afghanistan and Pakistan

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama says there is significant progress in Afghanistan and Pakistan toward the core U.S. goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating violent extremists and that while in some areas the gains are "fragile and reversible," more Afghans are reclaiming their communities from the Taliban.

Describing the results of the annual Afghanistan and Pakistan policy review in a briefing December 16 at the White House, Obama said U.S. and NATO coalition troops and Pakistani and Afghan security forces are engaged in a "very difficult endeavor" against al-Qaida and the Taliban, but "we are on track to achieve our goals."

"Today, al-Qaida's senior leadership in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan is under more pressure than at any point since they fled Afghanistan nine years ago. Senior leaders have been killed. It's harder for them to recruit; it's harder for them to travel; it's harder for them to train; it's harder for them to plot and launch attacks," he said.

"It will take time to ultimately defeat al-Qaida," the president said. "But make no mistake, we are going to remain relentless in disrupting and dismantling that terrorist organization."

Although progress against the Taliban in Afghanistan has been slow, "there is no question we are clearing more areas from Taliban control and more Afghans are reclaiming their communities," he said, and this provides increased space for better governance and economic development.

Targets for expanding the number of trained Afghan security forces are also being met, the president said. Obama said he still expects the number of American forces in the country to drop starting in July 2011. U.S. forces will continue to be in Afghanistan as full security responsibility for the country is transitioned to Afghan forces by the end of 2014.

Obama said the Pakistani government now recognizes that terrorist networks operating in its border regions with Afghanistan also threaten Pakistan. The United States, Obama said, has welcomed Pakistani security offensives and will continue to help strengthen Pakistan's security capacity.

"Nevertheless, progress has not come fast enough," he

said, and "we will continue to insist to Pakistani leaders that terrorist safe havens within their borders must be dealt with."

The U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue is working to deepen trust and cooperation between the two countries and the United States is speeding up investment in Pakistan's civilian institutions and in development projects aimed at improving the lives of Pakistanis, Obama said.

"The United States is committed to an enduring partnership that helps ... improve security, development and justice for the Pakistani people," he said.

The review assessed the progress of Obama's strategy, announced December 1, 2009, in which he said he was sending 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan to "seize the initiative" from violent extremists and responsibly begin to transfer the country's security to Afghan forces in July 2011. As part of the president's strategy, the United States would also reinforce Afghan civil and economic development, and support Pakistan's efforts to achieve security and enhance development.

KEY PARTS OF STRATEGY "WORKING WELL," CLINTON SAYS

Speaking after Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said, "Today's review shows that while we face serious challenges ... key parts of our strategy are indeed working well."

The U.S.-Pakistani relationship has transformed "beyond a purely transactional relationship dominated by military cooperation" to a "broad engagement on both the civilian and military side," including cooperation on energy, agriculture, education and health, Clinton said.

"Our partnership is slowly but steadily improving. We have greater cooperation and understanding, and that is yielding tangible results on the ground," Clinton said.

The U.S. civilian presence in Afghanistan is helping to consolidate military gains in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, Clinton said, and the review has "emphasized the need for a political process in Afghanistan, including reconciliation and expanded regional and international diplomacy."

Along with achieving its core goal against al-Qaida, Clinton said, the United States is committed to "becoming strong partners" with both Afghanistan and Pakistan "for the long term" and will continue to support their efforts to build a future that is "secure, prosperous and free and does not pose a threat to the people of the United States."

Defense Secretary Robert Gates acknowledged that U.S.,

coalition and Afghan forces are suffering more casualties as they fight to reclaim traditional Taliban strongholds.

"But as a result of the tough fight under way, the Taliban control far less territory today than they did a year ago," and military progress over the past three to four months "has exceeded my expectations," Gates said.

The growth of Afghan security forces is "ahead of schedule," with 65,000 new recruits during 2010, he said. "Afghan troops are already responsible for security in Kabul and are increasingly taking the lead in Kandahar, where they make up more than 60 percent of the fighting forces."

At the same time, Pakistan has committed more than 140,000 troops against the extremist safe havens within its borders, he said.

"I believe that we will be able to achieve the key goals laid out by the president last year," Gates said, and Afghan security forces will begin taking the lead in 2011 to secure their country and to assume full control by the end of 2014.

United Nations Lifts Sanctions on Iraq

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — In a meeting chaired by U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, the United Nations Security Council voted December 15 to lift three key international sanctions on Iraq. Biden said the vote acknowledges the "significant steps Iraq has taken" toward fulfilling its international obligations.

"Iraq is on the cusp of something remarkable: a stable, self-reliant nation; a just, representative and accountable government; and a positive force for peace and stability in the region," Biden said at the 15-nation Security Council meeting at U.N. headquarters in New York.

"As a founding member of the United Nations, Iraq seeks and deserves the opportunity to resume its rightful role in the community of nations," Biden said. "Toward that end, this session formally acknowledges the significant steps Iraq has taken toward fulfilling its obligations to the United Nations incurred in the lead-up to the 1991 Gulf War."

Sanctions first were imposed on Iraq after Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

In a December 15 statement, the Security Council said it recognizes that "the situation now existing in Iraq is significantly different" from when the sanctions resolutions were adopted. And while mandates remain

for Iraq to resolve disputes with Kuwait, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari praised the council's decision to recognize his country's progress.

"After years of being sanctioned by Security Council resolutions due to ... Saddam's regime, I think today we closed a dark chapter," he said. "I think this shows that Iraq is coming back truly to its rightful place among the community of nations."

The council voted to remove mandates on Iraq aimed at preventing the country from building weapons of mass destruction. Iraq now is free to pursue a peaceful nuclear program.

Biden said the decision was "in recognition of Iraq's commitment to nonproliferation" and its compliance with international treaties.

A second resolution formally ends the Oil-for-Food program, and the third returns control of Iraq's gas and oil revenue to its government starting July 1, 2011.

"The adoption of these important resolutions marks the beginning of the end of the sanctions regime, and restrictions on Iraq's sovereignty, independence and recovery," Zebari told the council.

"Our people will rejoice for having turned a chapter on the aggressive, belligerent and defiant behavior of the previous regime toward international law and legitimacy."

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon also praised the resolutions, calling their passage a "milestone" for Iraq.

"We recognize how far the country has come in key aspects of its journey to normalize its status in the community of nations," he said.

He commended the resilience of the Iraqi people and pledged continued U.N. support to help them along "the path of prosperity and peace."

Biden also pledged continued U.S. support "to reinforce the progress being made in Iraq."

"To be sure, Iraq faces further challenges on the road to security and prosperity," he said. "But I firmly believe that despite these challenges, Iraq's best days are ahead."

While the U.S. mission has transitioned from military-led engagement to civilian-led engagement, 50,000 troops will remain to advise and assist their Iraqi counterparts through 2011.

U.S.-China Commerce and Trade Meeting “Productive and Effective”

Washington — The 21st session of the U.S.-China Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade (JCCT) made progress on intellectual property rights, open markets and government procurement restrictions, according to U.S. officials.

The session, held December 14 and 15 in Washington, was co-chaired by U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke, U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk and Chinese Vice Premier Wang Qishan. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack also joined in the discussions.

Other participants included U.S. Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman, U.S. Trade and Development Agency Director Leocadia Zak and representatives from the Treasury and State departments. Senior Chinese officials from 26 ministries and agencies also attended.

“The 21st JCCT was both productive and effective,” Locke said. “We were able to make progress on significant issues in a number of areas, and on other issues we have established channels that will allow us to continue our robust engagement and pursue timely solutions.”

The United States and China signed seven new agreements covering agricultural collaboration, soybean exports, statistics and promotion of investment in the United States.

The JCCT, established in 1983, is the main forum for addressing trade issues and promoting commercial opportunities between the United States and China.

In this session, China agreed to significant initiatives in several areas, including intellectual property rights protection, open and neutral technology standards, and clean-energy cooperation. China also agreed to resume talks on beef market access.

In addition, China agreed not to discriminate in government procurement based on the origin of intellectual property or to use discriminatory criteria to select industrial equipment.

TRADE ISSUES

China’s latest commitments regarding intellectual property rights “build on China’s recently announced special campaign against counterfeiting and piracy,” Kirk said. “These commitments will have systemic consequences for the protection of U.S. innovation and creativity in China.”

Kirk predicted the agreements reached in Washington

will result in China’s increased purchase and use of legal software, stepped-up efforts to eradicate piracy of electronic journals, more effective regulation to curtail Internet piracy, and crackdowns on landlords who rent space to counterfeiters.

During the 21st session of the JCCT, China also pledged to accelerate its accession to the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Government Procurement.

That pact, the WTO’s only legally binding agreement focused on government purchases, stipulates that the principles of openness, transparency and nondiscrimination apply to WTO members’ procurement activities.

“China agreed to work with provincial and local governments and to submit a robust revised offer of [procurement] coverage in 2011,” Kirk said.

Locke particularly hailed China’s decision to revise a major equipment catalogue for heavy machinery and other industrial equipment so that it cannot be used to discriminate against foreign suppliers.

Progress on resolving U.S. access to China’s beef market was lauded by the U.S. agriculture secretary. Vilsack said that “technical talks will resume as soon as possible with the goal of re-opening China’s market in early 2011.”

ENERGY COOPERATION

The U.S. commerce secretary praised China’s pledge to adhere to openness, nondiscrimination and transparency in its smart-grid market and the planned bilateral cooperation in creating smart-grid standards.

The smart-grid market has an estimated worth of \$600 billion, according to Locke.

At the JCCT session, the U.S. Trade Development Agency celebrated a decade of work in China by extending its program in the country for another 10 years and awarding two grants.

One grant will help China develop state smart-grid standards, while the other will fund a feasibility study and pilot project to develop a system for integrated, real-time water monitoring.

Both grants aim to support China’s efforts to reduce air and water pollution, and further the Obama administration’s goals of promoting green technologies and cooperating with China to mitigate climate change.

The \$442,380 grant to the China State Grid Electric Power Research Institute will fund technical assistance to

develop Chinese standards in smart-grid technology that is harmonized with U.S. standards.

Advancing the deployment of smart-grid technologies will help China meet rapidly growing energy demands through increased efficiency in the generation and transmission of electricity, according to the U.S. Trade Development Agency.

A \$585,745 grant to the Changjiang Water Resources Commission will evaluate the potential for employing technologies developed by a Virginia-based company to address China's water-monitoring challenges in the Han River watershed. Development of such a monitoring system would help ensure clean drinking-water supplies to millions of people in northern China.

U.S. and South Asia Continued to Strengthen Ties in 2010

By Carrie Loewenthal Massey
Special Correspondent

New York — Reflecting on a year of partnerships and diplomatic ties with South Asian countries, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake promised the United States "will continue our very strong engagement" in the region.

From Washington, Blake spoke with journalists in South Asia via telephone December 15 and addressed a range of issues regarding U.S. relations with India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

COLLABORATING WITH INDIA

President Obama's November visit to India marked a "watershed" moment in United States-India relations, Blake said, as it launched the countries' "global strategic partnership."

"The United States and India will now look on activities that move beyond our bilateral relations to have a far-reaching impact, both regionally and globally," Blake told reporters.

Those efforts include helping emerging democracies shape their governments and the development of nonproliferation protocols to enhance global nuclear security, he said. Other U.S.-India collaborations aim to improve food security, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, and to enhance women's rights and agriculture production in Afghanistan.

"We are two of the leading democracies in the world, we are two of the leading market economies in the world, and we are two countries that want to take responsibility for addressing the global priorities and challenges that

exist," Blake said.

SUPPORTING SRI LANKA'S POST-CONFLICT TRANSITION

Blake expressed the United States' continued encouragement for Sri Lanka to have "an effective reconciliation and accountability process through which all Sri Lankans can move past the years of conflict and the country can grow and prosper."

Blake repeated U.S. support for the Sri Lankan government's Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission in its efforts to investigate war crimes and human rights abuses alleged during the more than 25 years of civil war in the country.

"The United States looks to this commission to apply international best practices, and that they undertake a serious investigation into these allegations of war crimes," Blake said.

Blake also called on the Sri Lankan government to release a detailed accounting of the status of all remaining internally displaced persons to allow humanitarian organizations to help with political and economic development processes in the northern part of the country and to organize a system for provincial council elections to take place in the north.

"The United States has been a longtime friend of Sri Lanka, and we are very much hoping that this process of reconciliation can occur as soon as possible so that Sri Lanka can realize the very considerable promise that it has," Blake said.

SUPPORTING NEPAL'S PEACE PROCESS AND CONSTITUTION

In Nepal, the United States is focusing on "support for the peace process and constitution building," the assistant secretary said. The United States provides expert advice and technical assistance to Nepal's constitution-drafting committees and works to facilitate dialogue among the political parties and strengthen civil society and the Nepali judiciary, he said.

"I think the United States, like the majority of the Nepali people, has been disappointed with the continued political stalemate in Nepal and the failure to agree on a new government," Blake said. "So I think now it's very important that Nepal's leaders reach agreement on a new government and that they then move forward very quickly to resolve the issues of integration and rehabilitation of Maoist combatants, power sharing, the drafting of a new constitution and all the other priorities that now exist."

In addition to political assistance, the United States will work to combat trafficking in persons in Nepal and will help Nepal's earthquake-readiness efforts by holding donor conferences in early 2011, Blake said.

PARTNERING WITH BANGLADESH ON GLOBAL ISSUES

Bangladesh experienced "impressive economic growth" in 2010 despite the global economic downturn, Blake said, and received recognition from the United Nations for making what Blake termed "exceptional" progress toward meeting the U.N. Millennium Development Goals.

The assistant secretary also praised Bangladesh and India for a "new era of cooperation" that resulted in several agreements between the two governments "that I think have the potential to benefit the citizens of both countries."

Recognizing these economic and political achievements, Blake said the United States would continue to work with Bangladesh "on a wide range of priorities including food security, climate change, global health, counterterrorism and democracy promotion."

SUSTAINING DEMOCRACY IN THE MALDIVES

Blake commended the Maldives' 2008 transition to a democratic government and offered encouragement as the country's opposing political parties strive to balance power and govern effectively.

"It's important, again, I think for all the parties to work together. They did so very successfully in developing and drafting the Maldives' new constitution, and they did so in helping to organize those elections that did take place," he said.

Confident the Maldivian leaders can continue to find ways to collaborate, Blake emphasized that "it's important to set aside a lot of the rancor and ... focus on what is going to benefit the Maldivian people."

U.S. Urges International Action to Eradicate Child Labor

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The U.S. Department of Labor is highlighting the worldwide problem of exploitive child labor practices and offering strategies for addressing it.

Three reports on international child labor practices just released by the department's Bureau of International Labor Affairs identify areas where governments need to

take action as well as goods that have been produced by child or forced labor. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis also called on governments around the world to take urgent and effective steps to eradicate child labor practices in their countries.

Speaking to reporters in Washington December 15 with Senator Tom Harkin (Democrat from Iowa), who has been a longtime advocate against child labor practices, Solis said the international community collectively needs to agree to take action to end the suffering of an estimated 115 million child laborers around the world.

"No one has the right to threaten the health, education and well-being of children by involving them in illegal or inappropriate work. No family should have to depend on the labor of its children to put food on the table, and no person should be forced to work in captivity," Solis said.

The reports, modeled after the State Department's annual report on human rights, highlight child labor practices from country to country and what governments are doing in response. One report includes the first set of proposed actions for countries to take, along with legislation, enforcement, policies and social programs they can use to address the worst forms of child labor.

A second contains an updated list of goods produced by child or forced labor. "This year's report includes six new goods from 12 new countries for a total of 128 goods from 70 countries. These are goods that the Department of Labor has reason to believe are produced by forced labor or child labor in violation of international labor standards," Solis said.

The United States has acknowledged the existence of child labor within its own borders, and the secretary said she has been working to step up domestic enforcement efforts. "The department has added over 350 new field investigators, issued regulations to keep young workers out of hazardous, nonagricultural jobs, and instituted a tougher penalty structure for employers found illegally employing children workers," she said.

In 2010, the Labor Department provided \$60 million for programs to address child labor exploitation around the world, including \$40 million in support of the International Labour Organization's efforts to eliminate the practice of child labor in 12 targeted countries.

"We're working with governments, the private sector, civil society to combat exploitive child labor in agriculture, including the West African cocoa sector, the Thai shrimp and seafood sector, the West African mining and quarrying sector, along with projects in Bolivia and El Salvador," Solis said.

She also reported that, for the first time, the Labor Department was able to remove a country from its list of nations where there is forced child labor, saying the Brazilian government has successfully eliminated the practice of children working in charcoal mines.

Senator Harkin said the Labor Department's reports are "an invaluable tool" to expose and eliminate the worst forms of child labor.

"Let me be clear about what we mean by the worst forms of child labor. It is not a son or a daughter helping out on the family farm. It's not a kid working after school," Harkin said.

"I'm talking about children who are forced to work, and denied the opportunity to go to school. These children endure long hours for little or no pay. They're exploited for the economic gains of others."

The exploitation of even one child diminishes everyone, he said.

"A nation cannot achieve prosperity on the backs of its children. The only route to true prosperity is by developing the brains of our children," Harkin said.

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